



## A TROPICAL PALETTE KEYED TO DIAMOND HEAD

ISLAND COLORS INFUSE AN OAHU RESIDENCE  
WITH THE SPIRIT OF OLD HAWAII

INTERIOR DESIGN BY CARLETON VARNEY AND DANIEL S. PARKER OF DOROTHY DRAPER & COMPANY  
TEXT BY BROOKS PETERS PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON BLUNT

I've always been of the theory that most people don't see color," says New York-based interior designer Carleton Varney, who sports a dazzling green-and-gold silk cravat that is hard not to notice. "I mean, they don't see color the way I see color."

From anyone else such a comment might border on braggadocio, but coming from Varney, the successor to the legendary decorator Dorothy Draper and writer of such fanciful mysteries as *Kiss the Hibiscus Goodnight*, the statement rings true. For throughout his long career designing for hotels, ambassadors and presidents, as well as for private clients, he has splashed interiors with radiant jewel tones and lush tropical hues. What he seeks to unleash,

he says, is a certain "luminescence."

A recent residential project on Oahu in Hawaii is no exception. Sited on a rise near Diamond Head overlooking Honolulu's skyline, the 1940s Mediterranean-style villa glows with sensuous yellows, melon greens, cool aquas and hot hibiscus pinks. "The house harks back to a time on the islands before the explosion of high rises," Varney relates. "Today everything is glass-and-concrete castles on the sand. But this is the Hawaii of the rainbow and the simple flowers of a beautiful lei."

In an overdeveloped resort city such as Honolulu, where leis are now plastic and vintage Hawaiian shirts sell for thousands of dollars, Varney's nostalgic vision is a welcome anomaly.

LEFT: "We drew on Hawaiian traditions," says Carleton Varney, who reworked Jun Gi and Eul Sun Hong's 1940s Mediterranean-style villa near Diamond Head in Honolulu with associate Daniel S. Parker.

"I've always been enamored of the colors of island flowers." BELOW: A triptych by Peggy Hopper becomes a backdrop in the lanai for a Varney-designed banquet and bamboo-motif pillow fabric.





His clients, Jun Gi and Eul Sun Hong—an industrialist and his wife—selected the designer because they appreciate his bold yet traditional style. “People come to me because I do rooms that have bright, tremendous floral prints and happy environments,” he says. “I know that isn’t avant-garde in certain circles. It’s strictly a matter of color. There’s no magic without it.”

Eul Sun Hong has her own magic, Varney says. “She’s a very beautiful woman, and she wears the colors I do rooms in.” If he had a guiding purpose, it was to infuse the rather staid, stucco spaces with Eul Sun Hong’s “sparkle.” The Hong’s own other houses in Tokyo and their native Korea and a horse and cattle ranch located elsewhere in Hawaii. They envisioned this dwelling, however, as a vacation home for the entire family. And vacation homes usually mean sand—and lots of it. Notes Varney, “Everyone thinks of a beach house, whether it’s in Palm Beach, Pebble Beach or Waikiki Beach, as the following: It has to be beige. It has to have rattan. And it has to have Haitian cotton fabrics, clean manila walls and draperies on bamboo poles that blow in the wind. I don’t do that. I hate everything beige.”

Armed with his signature—and anything-but-drab—palette, Varney ventured into the project with his customary gusto and painted up a storm. The pristine interiors now exude a comfortable cheerfulness that complements the pastel pink stucco façade and the crisp lines of the terra-cotta roof. “It’s a house of many moods,” Varney offers. These moods are manifest in the fresh floral fabrics, the geometric patterns on the floors and ceilings and the subtle stripes in the wallcoverings. The play of light and color is seamless and fluid, soothing to both the eye and the soul. There’s a *mélange* of European antiques, a Tiffany lamp and contemporary art, as well as native touches: a

A coffered ceiling with recessed lighting provides soft illumination in the hibiscus-pink living room. The checkerboard floor and the *faux*-zebra-skin rug were hand-painted by Deborah Lambeth.



"My inspiration for the residence goes back to the era when the buildings in old Hawaii were pastel pink and decorated with bright island colors," says Varney. ABOVE: The master bedroom window frames a panorama of the city beyond.

handmade island quilt and a vintage film poster from *Honolulu Lu*.

Outside, Varney and his architectural design associate Daniel S. Parker installed stucco planters and a terra-cotta-tile terrazzo, and painted a wooden pergola green to reflect the surrounding vegetation. In the rock garden, the gentle splash of a waterfall evokes the mysteries of the rain forest.

No stranger in paradise, Varney has designed several prominent hotels in

Hawaii, including the gargantuan Sheraton Waikiki, with nineteen hundred rooms, and the tiny Hotel Lanai, with a mere ten. Tackling a simple house like this one was a departure for him, one that required a nimble shifting of gears and concentration. "When I do a residence," he says emphatically, "I live with it. I dream it. I get totally involved in all the details. I'm always picking up this and that from sources, knowing exactly where

it should go. I even make sure the family has enough books. I worry about my clients more than they do."

Such meticulous attention has unforeseen rewards. "When people ask me what I do for a living," Carleton Varney says, "I tell them I create memories. That's what good design is all about. And this house has a lot of memorable moments. When you walk out of it, you will definitely know where you were." □

ABOVE: A bold floral fabric, pink trim and lining and a striped wallcovering, all created by Carleton Varney, punctuate the master bedroom, which looks out to the gardens. Botanical prints are hung on one wall.

RIGHT: The terrace off the master bedroom offers a dramatic nighttime view of the glittering Honolulu skyline. "I wanted the house to evoke the time before the arrival of high rises on the beach," explains Varney.

